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NATO
(Sent to S.P.
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Office of National Estimates

17 March 1961

MEMORANDUM

SECRET: Soviet Reaction to Improved Conventional NATO
Capabilities

1. Would a major improvement in NATO's non-nuclear capabilities, under a policy of raising the threshold of nuclear response, tempt the USSR to a more aggressive military policy in Europe?
2. Why it might. The Soviets might reason that, if NATO had an improved conventional capability, its first military response in various contingencies would be conventional, whereas without such an improved capability it would probably have to be nuclear. They might further calculate that, in the extreme tension created by conventional hostilities, NATO could be deterred by political pressure and military threat from going on to use nuclear weapons. According to this line of reasoning, they would thus be tempted to be more aggressive in areas where, if war ensued, they would enjoy a conventional superiority.

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3. Why it might not. The Soviets might reason that NATO is reluctant to respond at all to aggressive moves in cases where less than vital Western interests are threatened but the only available response is nuclear. Conversely, if NATO had a realistic alternative of responding conventionally, the Soviets would probably calculate that NATO would be more likely to make this response in such situations, reserving a later resort to nuclear weapons if this proved necessary. Additionally, they might think (contrary to the previous paragraph) that NATO, once engaged at a conventional level, would be less reluctant than otherwise to initiate use of nuclear weapons.

4. We find the second of these arguments more compelling. We believe that the Soviets would have great difficulty in convincing themselves that, in the highly uncertain circumstances of active hostilities at a conventional level, NATO would decide to accept defeat rather than use nuclear weapons. We think, for reasons stated in a previous memorandum, that they would need to have high assurances on this point before they would deliberately choose to create such a situation. In sum, they probably would anticipate a greater NATO readiness to respond if a conventional option were available to it, and a great danger that NATO might resort subsequently to nuclear weapons if its conventional strength proved insufficient,

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